

Crenshaw Line Has Momentum

By Bishop Gregory L. Dixon, Gene Hale and Mayor Daniel K. Tabor

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For our community, the Crenshaw/LAX rail line represents the final eight-and-a-half miles of a much longer journey. More than a quarter century ago, Mayor Tom Bradley, Congressman Julian Dixon and then-State Senator Diane Watson championed the idea of a rail line linking the Crenshaw District to a transit network spread across Los Angeles County.

But the Crenshaw line was soon derailed. After languishing for decades, the project was revived in the last two years through a push from County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas. Last week, U.S. Senator Barbara Boxer joined Ridley-Thomas, Mayor Villaraigosa and Los Angeles County Federation of Labor head Maria Elena-Durazo to announce a \$546 million Obama Administration loan for Crenshaw rail.

The Crenshaw line is back on track, and it's time to speed that train up! We have been patient. Now we must move full steam ahead.

In the 1980's, the Crenshaw line was conceived as the backbone of economic opportunity for our community, improving access to our neighborhoods and business districts in an attractive manner that would also enhance property values. We had earlier sacrificed too much of that value for the construction of the Santa Monica Freeway, which cut across our community and scarred its landscape.

Over time, other areas and other priorities surpassed our community's rail line. MTA began talking about the Crenshaw line as a bus service. Its completion goal was pushed out to 2029.

Such delay and downgrading should never have been acceptable to us. Mayor Bradley and Congressman Dixon never got to see the rail line they envisioned. During those years of waiting, another freeway, I-105, bisected our community.

Still, we gave for the greater good. African American voters overwhelmingly backed Measure R, the 2008 ballot initiative that will generate \$40 billion for public transportation projects throughout the county.

In 2008, we committed ourselves to again aim higher. On the MTA Board, Supervisor Ridley-Thomas made it clear a bus was not acceptable. A rail line was to be the standard, not an option, just as it has been for other Los Angeles neighborhoods.

A commitment to rail was secured from MTA in December, 2009.

Rather than allow another generation to pass before Crenshaw saw a train, the completion target for the rail line was accelerated to 2016. In the past year, Ridley-Thomas traveled to Washington several times to lobby for funding.

With the help of allies like Senators Boxer and Feinstein as well Congressman Jane Harman, that lobbying effort is starting to pay off through victories like last week's \$546 million loan announcement. This train is not turning back.

We must now build on this momentum to ensure the Crenshaw/LAX rail line becomes all it should be.

Even before it begins to move passengers, the Crenshaw line will drive employment when construction begins, hopefully in 2012. Supervisor Ridley-Thomas is now seeking to ensure the 8,000 jobs on the project include local residents. The work must be done with a Project Labor Agreement to ensure workers are protected, while contractors can be assured of a smooth construction process without labor disputes.

Small businesses must also be guaranteed a fair share of the work. Our local small businesses create the most bang for the buck in generating jobs for area residents. Done right, investments from the rail line will multiply in countless ways as old businesses expand and new ones emerge due to the presence of this important transportation artery.

Finally, we must commit to a first-class project. We cannot allow our aspirations to be deferred or diminished. That means we can not accept a route that brings noise and traffic congestion to our neighborhoods, and possibly create safety risks for pedestrians and drivers.

A below-ground train may be what's needed to bolster the value of existing commercial properties and homes and encourages the construction of new businesses and residences; a train running in front of homes or businesses, if not built with painstaking care, can become a nuisance and liability, just as a freeway can.

The argument against a below-ground train is there is no money for it; something we've heard before. We heard for decades there was no money for a Crenshaw rail line, only a busway. We rejected that argument and secured our fair share of funds for the rail line we deserve. Now, we must make sure additional funds made available to the Crenshaw line are not diverted to other projects; we must not let others define our goals and suggest we settle for less, while they take more.

Can we afford a Crenshaw line that runs below street level? As lawmakers mull that question, our community needs to send a clear message: We have paid the price for transportation as long as we've been here. The voices of Tom Bradley, Julian Dixon and Diane Watson echo today in our call for a viable Crenshaw rail line.

We now want a return on our investment while we're still here. We've waited long enough.

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